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Structuring Memory
The Haymarket Martyrs' Monument

What is the role of memory in shaping our understanding of history? The answer to this question crosses the disciplinary boundaries of anthropology, sociology, psychology, and history and links together academic scholarship with local public history efforts. This connection can be illustrated through the the National Park Service's Labor History Theme Study which attempted to negotiate the terrain between preservation, memory, and labor history in order to determine labor history sites that qualified for designation as National Historic Landmarks. The site of the 1886 Haymarket incident in Chicago was especially interesting and offered an example of the difficulties in combining our understanding of memory, history, and authenticity.

Historians consider Haymarket one of the seminal events in the history of American labor. On May 1, 1886, close to 300,000 strikers nationwide and 40,000 in Chicago took part in demonstrations for the eight-hour workday. This movement was part of an international struggle for workers' rights, and the heart of the movement was in Chicago, where the anarchist International Working Peoples' Association (IWPA) played a central role in organizing the May Day strikes. These strikes coincided with a strike and lockout at the McCormick Reaper Works, where workers had been protesting the hiring of Pinkerton detectives and replacement workers to keep strikers at bay. When peaceful picketing at the shops was met with police brutality, labor and anarchists groups organized a meeting in Haymarket Square to protest. At the conclusion of this May 4 meeting, as the last speaker finished his remarks, police marched in and demanded an end to the gathering. Then an unknown assailant threw a bomb into the crowd, killing and wounding several police officers and protesters. Police apprehended eight anarchists on charges of conspiracy to commit murder. All were tried and convicted although no evidence linked them to the bomb, and many of the accused were not even present during the time of the bombing. The trial and subsequent execution of four of the men, Albert Parsons, August Spies, Adolf Fischer, and George Engel, have served as an enduring symbol of the struggles waged by labor in the face of police brutality and a public fearful of challenges to the social order. As historian Paul Avrich explains, "Haymarket demonstrated, in more dramatic form than any other event of the post-Civil War era, both the inequities of American capitalism and the limitations of American justice."[1]

The importance of recognizing Haymarket's national significance for labor history required that the Labor History Theme Study recommend a suitable site to commemorate this event. There were two possible candidate sites. The first, the site of the Haymarket meeting and bombing in Haymarket Square on the corner of Des Plaines Avenue and Randolph Street, lacks physical integrity, as the construction of the Kennedy Expressway in the 1950s resulted in the razing of many of the buildings in the area and the destruction of the environment associated with the market. The second and the one eventually recommended for National Historic Landmark designation was the Haymarket Martyrs Monument and surrounding grave site at Forest Home Cemetery (originally part of German Waldheim cemetery) in Forest Park, Illinois to serve as the physical reminder of the importance of Haymarket. The decision to recommend the latter site was made because the monument itself has become an icon of the labor movement and has taken on international historical significance beyond its role in commemorating the events of 1886.

The first example of the iconic role the site would come to serve in American labor and radical history came after the November 11, 1887, execution of the Haymarket martyrs. The funeral procession on Sunday November 13 reflected the pervasive sense of tragedy and injustice over the deaths of the accused. Over 200,000 people reportedly lined the streets. The marchers went to the homes of each of the dead to retrieve their coffins, then proceeded down Milwaukee Avenue into downtown Chicago, where close to 10,000 boarded a train at Grand Central Station and headed to the cemetery in Forest Park, ten miles west of Chicago, the only cemetery which would accept the bodies of the martyrs.[2]

The initiative for dedicating a statue to the martyrs came from the Pioneer Aid and Support Association (PASA), incorporated on December 15, 1887, with the purpose of "providing for the families of the executed men and of erecting a monument to their memory."[3]

On October 12, 1890, PASA opened its design competition, with prizes offered to the top three designs. The Association had raised close to $6,000 from sympathizers nationally and throughout the world. On February 14, 1892, the monument committee announced that the commission

would go to Albert Weinert (1863-1947), a German-American who had studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. The cornerstone to the monument was laid on November 6, 1892.[4] The dedication ceremony took place on June 25, 1893 and was attended by over 8,000 people.

In the years since the dedication, the monument has become an icon to both the labor and radical movements. The emotion inspired by a visit to the monument was expressed most clearly during the 50th anniversary of the executions. In 1937, PASA organized a 50th Commemoration of the Haymarket tragedy and executions, setting up a Memorial Committee which contacted labor and radical groups throughout the world (except in the Soviet Union).

PASA continued to sponsor ceremonial tributes to the martyrs and the cause of social justice throughout the next few decades. By 1960, though, PASA had diminished to only three members. The group turned over whatever funds it had to Waldheim Cemetery for the perpetual care of the monument. Then, on May 2, 1971, PASA held a public ceremony at the monument to turn over the title to the newly-formed Illinois Labor History Society (ILHS). ILHS sponsored an even larger celebration to commemorate the Centennial of the Haymarket Affair on May 4, 1986.

Perhaps the greatest testimony to the enduring legacy of the Haymarket incident, symbolized by the monument is the continued desire of those associated with the labor movement to be buried alongside the Haymarket martyrs. This appeal extends far beyond Chicago; many of those buried here are people from throughout the nation and even the world captivated by the memory of the martyrs and what they symbolize. Among the first to do so were Joe Hill (1882-1915), another martyr in the labor movement, and William Haywood (1869-1928), one of the founders of the IWW; both had their ashes scattered next to the monument.

The Haymarket Martyrs' Monument. The sculpture represents Justice, in the form of a woman, placing a wreath on the head of a fallen worker, an image sculptor Albert Weinert took from a verse of La Marseillaise, *the French national anthem. Photo courtesy NPS.*

Haymarket has provided a symbol through which various groups have been able to create a usable past and shared pride in radical heritage. Indeed, activists worldwide continue to invoke the history of the Haymarket martyrs in their struggles for labor and civil rights. Workers visit the monument in tribute to its central role in labor history. In the early 1980s, visitors marked the monument with the label "Solidarity," linking the monument to Polish struggles for political freedom. Similarly, South African workers during apartheid fought for the right to have May Day recognized as the official commemoration of workers, as it is in most nations throughout the world.

On May 3, 1998 the Haymarket Monument was dedicated as a National Historic Landmark for American Labor History. In conjunction with the official dedication and awarding of a bronze tablet by the National Park Service, the Illinois Labor History Society (ILHS) organized a ceremony at the site which drew over 1,000 people. . To highlight the legacy of the Monument as a site of struggle and the expression of diverse opinion, the ceremony witnessed heckling by a group of young anarchists protesting the role of the Park Service—an agency of state power—in dedicating the Monument. After a brief scuffle, the anarchists let the ceremony proceed, though they left a symbol of their protest on the base of the statue: graffiti stating "Down With Power." This scuffle serves to reiterate the central role of the site in providing a place for the struggle of workers and the fight for workers' rights to continue.

The process of nominating the Haymarket monument forces us to rethink our understanding of authenticity as we select sites to preserve for labor history. The Haymarket Martyrs Monument has taken on international significance through its role as an icon of labor and radical history. While the site where the Haymarket incident took place may be more "authentic" in its relationship to the event itself, the monument and cemetery symbolize the process of creating cultural heritage through a poignant, enduring legacy of collective identity. Thus, it is the function the legacy of Haymarket has served throughout the 20th century, with its ability to structure social memory and link present-day struggles to the past, that makes the Haymarket Monument historically significant and an authentic symbol of labor heritage in the United States.

Notes

1 Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p.xii.

2 Ibid., p. 396. See also Adelman, *Haymarket Revisited,* pp. 23-24, and H*aymarket Scrap Book,* pp. 121-26.

3 Melissa Dabakis, "Martyrs and Monuments of Chicago: The Haymarket Affair," *Prospects* 19 (1994), p. 113.

4 Ibid., pp.113-115.

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